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## **Nuclear Waste Solution Seen in Desert Salt Beds**

The New York Times

February 9, 2014

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CARLSBAD, N.M. -- Half a mile beneath the desert surface, in thick salt beds left behind by seas that dried up hundreds of millions of years ago, the Department of Energy is carving out rooms as long as football fields and cramming them floor to ceiling with barrels and boxes of nuclear waste.

The salt beds, which have the consistency of crumbly rock so far down in the earth, are what the federal government sees as a natural sealant for the radioactive material left over from making nuclear weapons.

The process is deceptively simple: Plutonium waste from Los Alamos National Laboratory and a variety of defense projects is packed into holes bored into the walls of rooms carved from salt. At a rate of six inches a year, the salt closes in on the waste and encapsulates it for what engineers say will be millions of years.

"It's eternity," said Dirk Roberson, a guide for the frequent tours the Energy Department gives to visitors to the salt mine, who leave with a souvenir plastic bag filled with chunks of salt pressed into rocklike form.

The complications of the present intruded last week, however, when a truck hauling salt in the mine caught fire. Smoke forced an evacuation of workers and a shutdown of waste burial operations, which officials said was temporary. They said the fire did not affect the radioactive waste, which is stored at the other end of the mine.

Despite the setback, the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, WIPP for short, is drawing new attention here in the New Mexico desert. At a time when the effort to find a place for highly radioactive civilian and military wastes is at a near-standstill, officials say the site might be a solution. It is of particular interest since the demise of the plan for Yucca Mountain, a volcanic ridge 100 miles from Las Vegas chosen by Congress for the storage of nuclear waste from power reactors and weapons, but adamantly opposed by the state of Nevada.

The material buried at the plant, which began accepting waste in 1999, is limited by law to plutonium waste from making weapons, which is exceptionally long-lived but not highly radioactive. The waste from spent nuclear fuel, which is far more radioactive in its first few centuries, is not permitted. But experts say that proper testing and analysis might show that the salt beds at WIPP are a good home for the radioactive waste that was once meant for Yucca.

Some people despair of finding a place for what officials call a high-level nuclear "repository" -- they shy away from "dump" -- but Allison M. Macfarlane, a geologist who is chairwoman of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission and who served on a presidential study commission established after the Yucca plan was canceled, said WIPP proves it can be done.

"The main lesson from WIPP is that we have already developed a geologic repository for nuclear waste in this country, so we can in the future," she said. The key, she said, is a site that is acceptable to both scientists and the local community.

The salt at WIPP is not much different from what goes into food. Phillip R. Sharp, who served on the same study commission as Ms. Macfarlane, said that when the group visited Carlsbad, about 25 miles west of the site, commission members were served cocktails -- margaritas garnished with salt from the repository.

But the salt behaves strangely around nuclear waste, which is warm to the touch. When the waste is buried in salt, tiny bits of water inside the salt start to move toward the heat. As a result, the salt left behind is stronger, like a good sealant. But it is still basically salt.

"The salt is completely unaffected by any nuclear waste you could imagine, period," said James Conca, a geologist and former director of the Carlsbad Environmental Monitoring and Research Center, a division of New Mexico State University.

With most things nuclear, however, the politics can be trickier than the science. In the case of WIPP, there is local support but skepticism farther afield.

In the nearby community, business and political leaders are agitating for expansion. John A. Heaton, a Democratic former state representative and the head of the Nuclear Opportunities Task Force, a local business group, argued that the geology was suitable. "The Permian basin is 250

million years old," he said. "It's been here a long, long time." His group has bought a patch of desert and is now exploring whether the land could be used for interim storage of highly radioactive waste.

Burial here, perhaps after recycling usable components, would be a boon for the area, Mr. Heaton added. "Nobody comes in and helps rural areas," he said. "You have to live by your wits."

State Representative Cathrynn N. Brown, a Republican, is also in favor of burying nuclear waste here. "We have a low earthquake incidence, a dry climate, and land that's really not being used for much else," she said.

Rev. David Wilson Rogers, of the First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Carlsbad, said: "This facility has the opportunity to give a blessing to the world by having a safe repository."

But at the state level, there is active opposition. Don Hancock, the nuclear safety director at the Southwest Research and Information Center, said he has been opposing WIPP since the 1970s, long before construction began. He said that the area was rich in oil and gas and that if someone drilled a well centuries from now, ignorant of what lay below, or if the repository expanded into drilled areas, the waste might escape. The 16-square-mile site is in a region thick with pump jacks, which have multiplied with the fracking boom.

The site should stick to its original mandate of storing plutonium waste, Mr. Hancock said. "If WIPP really is a pilot plant, as its name says, we should have WIPP do what it's supposed to do, and operate safely for 25 or 30 years, and then safely decommission it to demonstrate to us and the world that in fact geologic disposal does work."

"We should be looking for multiple other places anyway," he said.

Expanding WIPP, however, would require action by Congress.

Gov. Susana Martinez of New Mexico, a Republican, has taken what amounts to a radical position: undecided. "We haven't made any decision on any possible future mission for WIPP," said F. David Martin, the former head of the state's Environment Department and now the cabinet secretary-designate for the New Mexico Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department. "The governor wants to be assured by the science that it could be done safely."

### **Nuclear waste bill may stall due to changes in Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee leadership, CQ Roll Call reports**

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Senator Mary Landrieu (D-LA) has taken over as chairwoman of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, a move which CQ Roll Call says will stall work on the Nuclear Waste Administration Act of

2013 (S. 1240). Landrieu takes the gavel from Senator Ron Wyden (D-OR), who moved to chair the Senate Finance Committee.

Wyden introduced the nuclear waste bill in July of last year, with support and co-sponsorship from the Energy and Natural Resources Committee ranking member, Senator Lisa Murkowski (R-AK), and leaders of the Energy and Water Appropriations Subcommittee, Senators Dianne Feinstein (D-CA) and Lamar Alexander (R-TN).

Landrieu did not co-sponsor the measure, and *CQ Roll Call* reports she is unlikely to champion the bill, in part due to her focus on fossil fuel issues. Although Murkowski is a supporter and co-sponsor of the bill, she is not bullish on its prospects this year. "I'm very cognizant of our calendar that is in front of us," *CQ Roll Call* reports Murkowski saying. "This is an issue that doesn't have as great a level of participation by other members."

## **House Suspends Debt Limit for 13 Months**

Government Executive

February 11, 2014

[LINK](#)

The House on Tuesday evening voted to suspend the nation's debt ceiling through March 15, 2015.

The Senate likely will pass the debt ceiling bill later this week. Lawmakers have until Feb. 27 to raise or again suspend the debt limit without risking default, according to Treasury Secretary Jack Lew. The debt ceiling, which was suspended in October 2013, was reinstated and reached again on Feb. 7, at which point the Treasury Department used "extraordinary measures" to prevent the nation from defaulting.

House Republican leadership opted on Tuesday to bring a "clean" bill on the debt limit to the floor, instead of tying it to a repeal of cuts to some military pensions. The chamber held a separate vote earlier Tuesday on the pension bill, restoring full cost-of-living adjustments to working-age military retirees by reversing a provision included in the two-year budget agreement.

The bill, which garnered very little Republican support and passed in a 221-201 vote, will suspend the \$17.2 trillion debt ceiling through March 15, 2015.

House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, decided to separate the bills after he determined he did not have the votes necessary to move forward with combined legislation. Democrats in the House and Senate, as well as President Obama, have said they would not support any debt limit bill that was not "clean," meaning without other provisions attached. The House was originally scheduled to vote on both bills Wednesday, but decided to expedite the process because of an impending snowstorm expected to hit the Washington, D.C. area.

House Republicans have said any move to undo the COLA reduction must include a "pay-for," and their bill included a one-year extension of

sequestration spending caps on Medicare to offset the costs. The House considered the legislation under a suspension of the rules, meaning the bill required a two-thirds majority to pass, a threshold it cleared easily.

House Minority Whip Steny Hoyer, D-Md., voiced opposition to the bill prior to the vote, saying it was reducing the cuts to one group on the back of another.

"This is just the latest demonstration of why we cannot achieve the kind of comprehensive deficit reduction we need by way of small, piecemeal efforts that only ask one group to contribute -- whether they are our nation's veterans, federal employees, or anyone else," Hoyer said. Despite opposition from Hoyer and other House Democratic leadership, such as from Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., the bill won support from a majority of Democrats.

Rep. Paul Ryan, R-Wis., who co-authored the budget deal that instituted the cuts and has long advocated slashing compensation packages for those in federal service, expressed disappointment over the House's vote on reversing the military COLA reductions.

"I'm glad it keeps the compensation reforms for federal employees and billions of dollars in commonsense cuts," Ryan said in a statement. "But on military compensation, it takes a step back."

A bill to repeal the 1 percent cut to cost-of-living adjustments for members of the military who retire before the age of 62 unanimously cleared an initial hurdle in the Senate on Monday night. That measure, which the Senate planned to vote on as early as Tuesday night, does not include any provisions to offset the \$6 billion price tag of reinstituting the full COLA.

"We need to keep our promises to our veterans, no exceptions," said Sen. Mark Begich, D-Alaska, who co-sponsored the bill. "These brave men and women have earned these benefits through their sacrifice to our country. I am proud that the Senate voted to move forward on honoring our commitment to these veterans and their families today."

Sen. Mark Pryor, D-Ark., who introduced the bill, said there was plenty of time to figure out a pay-for in the weeks and months ahead.

"I'm totally open to talking to people about how to pay for this how we go," Pryor said on the Senate floor Tuesday. "But let's for crying out loud not send the message to our veterans that we're going to balance the budget on their back."

Nearly everyone in Congress has agreed to roll back the COLA cuts for working-age military retirees, but lawmakers have failed to reach bipartisan agreement on if, and how, they should pay for the repeal. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., said he was opposed to the current House plan. When the Senate votes on the clean pension restoration bill, Reid said he will allow a vote on New Hampshire Republican Sen. Kelly Ayotte's amendment to pay for the repeal by barring illegal immigrants from claiming a child tax credit.

## **Oak Ridge shipments to WIPP to resume mid-March**

Frank Munger's Atomic City Underground

February 6, 2014

[LINK](#)

Waste shipments to the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant in New Mexico were halted this week as a result of a truck fire in the underground waste repository. The operational emergency was called off early this morning, according to info distributed by the Department of Energy's Carlsbad (N.M.) Office.

There apparently was no direct impact on DOE's Oak Ridge operations, because Oak Ridge shipments to WIPP were put on hold in late 2011. The Central Characterization Project team was pulled out of Oak Ridge because of budget issues, etc. Since then, the contractor at DOE's Transuranic Waste Processing Center continued to process waste and prepare it for eventual disposal, and the CCP team returned to Oak Ridge in October to once again get the certification process going.

According to Mike Koentop, executive officer of DOE's Environmental Management Office in Oak Ridge, the plan is to restart shipments to WIPP in mid-March.

"CCP mobilized to the TWPC on October 1st 2013. Since then, they have been working to recertify the Oak Ridge characterization program," Koentop said in a statement via email. "This involves procedure development, personnel training and initial certification activities. It is anticipated that shipments will begin in mid-March after the annual WIPP maintenance outage."

## **Markey joins Senate Environment and Public Works committee**

The Hill

February 11, 2014

[LINK](#)

Sen. Ed Markey (D-Mass.) was appointed to the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, which has a large say in federal transportation issues, on Wednesday.

Markey is replacing former Sen. Max Baucus (D-Mont.), who was appointed recently to be U.S. Ambassador to China, on the panel.

Markey said he was glad to be appointed to the committee and looking forward to working on both transportation and environmental issues.

"The work done on the Environment and Public Works Committee is proof that we can have a healthy economy and a healthy environment at the same time, creating jobs even as we cut pollution," Markey said in a statement. "Whether it's repairing our roads and bridges, expanding commerce at Boston Harbor, or combating climate change, I am going to use my service on this committee to help Massachusetts now and in the

future."

The chairwoman of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.), said she glad to have Markey aboard the panel.

"Sen. Markey will be a great addition to the Environment and Public Works Committee because of his proven effectiveness as a legislator," Boxer said in a statement. "He has shown great leadership on the issues that the EPW Committee is working on right now, including addressing climate change, investing in critical transportation and water infrastructure, and ensuring that our nuclear facilities are safe and secure. I welcome Sen. Markey to this committee and look forward to working with him on these critical issues."

Markey is joining the Senate's Public Works Committee at a time when the panel is in the midst of considering a potential reauthorization of the bill that provide federal appropriations for transportation projects.

The current version of the measure is scheduled to expire in September, and the budget forecaster have projected a potential shortfall in transportation funding of \$20 billion per year.

